

# Recidivism

## OFFENSE COMPARISON -- TWO DEFINITIONS

Since the early 1990s, the Washington Department of Corrections has been reporting on the return to prison of released offenders. Recidivism has been defined as "A return to a Washington State adult correctional facility as the result of a new conviction or parole violation by an offender who either had been paroled or been discharged from such a facility." In 1998, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, in conjunction with a variety of criminal justice agencies, developed a broader definition of recidivism. This definition, which was endorsed by the Legislature, is as follows: "A recidivism event is any offense committed after release to the community that results in a Washington State court legal action." This Recidivism Briefing Paper deals with two definitions of recidivism.

Data for **returns to prison** is presented for offenders releasing from the Washington State prison system between the years 1985 through 1998. The length of time between the offender's release date and the return date is what is accounted for under the return to prison recidivism definition.

Average Percent Return to Prison					
OFFENSE	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Property*	16.4	13.3	7.4	4.6	3.2
Person**	9.0	9.3	6.2	3.8	2.6
Drug	6.5	7.9	4.9	3.8	2.8
Sex	4.1	5.2	3.8	2.7	1.7
Overall Average	9.8	9.5	5.9	3.9	2.7

Data obtained from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy is presented for **new felony conviction** recidivism. This data is for offenders who released from the Washington State prison system during the years 1985 through 1997. The length of time between the offender's release date and the offense date of a new felony, for which the offender was subsequently convicted, is what is accounted for under the new felony conviction recidivism definition.

Average Percent New Felony Conviction					
OFFENSE	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Property*	30	12	7	4	3
Person**	18	9	6	4	3
Drug	19	10	6	4	3
Sex	7	4	4	3	2
Overall Average	20	9	6	4	3

\* Includes "Other" Offenses

\*\* Other than Sex Offense

A comparison of the data using the two different definitions reveals both similarities and differences. For all offense types, the new conviction rate is higher than the return to prison rate. Person, property, and drug offenders all commit new felony offenses and are returned to prison at a higher rate than sex offenders. The new conviction rate for drug offenders is higher than it is for person offenders, while the return to prison rate is lower.

The following graph shows recidivism rates, defined as return to a Washington State adult correctional facility among persons who have all had five years at risk of returning.

**ANALYSIS: Five Year  
at Risk Summary**

The release cohorts from 1985 through 1994 have had at least five years at risk. Overall, the five-year return rate is 32 percent. The return rates by offense category are as follows:

Property*	44%
Person**	31%
Drug	26%
Sex	19%

The differences in the return rates by offense are significant at the .001 level.

\* Includes "Other" Offenses  
\*\* Other than Sex Offense

**Average Percent Returned to Prison During  
the Five Years Following Release**

